Research on the Causes of Parents' Educational Anxiety under the Double Reduction Policy

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Abstract: China introduced a double reduction policy in 2021, but the survey found that parental education anxiety has not been sufficiently reduced. In order to reduce anxiety, the causes of the anxiety phenomenon need to be traced. Through documentary research, this study collated and summarised previous research and connected it with family capital theory and intensive mothering theory to explain the causes of anxiety. It is found that the limited economic, cultural, and social capital in a family can cause parental anxiety. Parents' anxiety is also affected when limited resources are confronted with parenting-intensive parents' high expectations of their children and utilitarian expectations of educational returns.

Keywords: Double reduction policy, educational anxiety, family capital, intensive mothering

1. Introduction

Anxiety is one of the most common emotions in the field of education, including learning, socialisation, frustrating experiences, and peer conflict [1]. In Chinese education research, parental education anxiety refers to the complex emotional state of tension, anxiety, worry and annoyance about parental education [2]. In order to reduce educational anxiety, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council of China issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training on Students in Compulsory Education (Double Reduction Policy) in July 2021 [3]. The policy consists of ‘double reduction’, the first ‘reduction’ is to reduce the excessive burden of homework and off-campus training on students. The second ‘reduction’ is to reduce family education expenses and the anxiety and burden of parents. The double reduction policy was a major education reform. However, according to a survey conducted by China Youth Daily, 27.3% of parents said that their educational anxiety had not been alleviated after the implementation of the double reduction policy [4].

In the context of the double reduction policy, scholars have explored the causes of parental anxiety in different ways. Most of the existing literature used interviews and questionnaires to understand parents’ anxiety after the implementation of the double reduction policy [5][6]. Although previous studies have explained the causes of parental anxiety, they have not connected them with theories. Therefore, this study will use theory to explain the causes of the phenomenon of parental anxiety.

The research question in this study is how to explain the causes of the phenomenon of parental anxiety using an interdisciplinary theory. This study used a literature research method to summarise 57 relevant texts and 9 relevant newspapers and news articles. Next, the study selected theories that
are more relevant to the characteristics of parental anxiety in China: family capital and intensive mothering. This research first briefly explained the reasons for choosing these theories. Then used the theories to explain the causes of parental anxiety in education by collating and summarising previous research. The main contribution of this study is the interdisciplinary approach, which draws on knowledge and theories from the fields of education, psychology and sociology. In addition, this study enriched the research in the area of double reduction policy and parental education anxiety. Understanding the causes can help to alleviate anxiety, which will provide a new perspective on the management of educational anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Double Reduction Policy

The objectives of the double reduction policy are to regulate out-of-school training, reduce the burden of homework on students in compulsory education, and reduce the burden of out-of-school training [3]. In particular, compulsory education is the education that all children and adolescents of school age must receive [7]. Compulsory education includes primary and junior high schools and is free of tuition and miscellaneous fees. The main elements of the double reduction policy include (a) reducing the total amount and length of homework, (b) upgrading after-school services in schools, (c) regulating out-of-school training, (d) improving the quality of education and teaching, and (e) strengthening support and governance [3].

2.2. Educational Anxiety

To explore educational anxiety from a theoretical perspective, one needs to first clarify its definition. According to the definition from the NHS, anxiety is a feeling of mild or severe unease, such as worry or fear [8]. Educational anxiety, as a branch of anxiety, can be understood as people's excessive worry, apprehension and even fear of education [9]. To understand educational anxiety, it is first necessary to categorise it. Although different schools of thought differ in their understanding of anxiety, most agree on the concept of anxiety. Anxiety includes chronic anxiety (a general tendency to be anxious) and state anxiety (a temporary state of varying intensity) [10]. This suggests that state anxiety is a transient emotional state that is reflected in a particular moment or event, causing immediate or related physical and psychological reactions [10]. Educational anxiety is anxiety that arises because of the specific event of education and should be classified as state anxiety.

Exploring educational anxiety in terms of the practical application of anxiety, educational anxiety can be studied from the perspective of disciplines, educational groups, and attributions. Firstly, educational anxiety in terms of disciplines refers to the anxiety presented when faced with different disciplines. Common ones are maths anxiety, foreign language education, and outdoor activity anxiety [11]. This is because mathematics, foreign languages and sports are difficult for some people. Therefore, people resist and become anxious about the subject. This study is biased towards taking a holistic view of subject anxiety. This is because, in compulsory education, students mainly learn the basics, and the differentiation caused by different subjects is not obvious enough. Second, from the perspective of the educational community, students, parents and teachers, as important parts of the education system, all experience anxiety about education. Parental educational anxiety, which is studied in this study, is a particular part of this. Parents are more worried about their children's future than teachers are, yet are unable to take charge of their own future in the same way as students. Parents are in an uncontrollable state of worry. Thirdly, educational anxiety is thought of in terms of attribution, which means explaining the causes of educational anxiety. Attribution is the process by which people seek the internal motivating factors of their behaviour from the results of their own behaviour [12]. Individual attributions can generally be categorised as internal and external, stable
and non-stable [12]. This study will build on previous research and experience to explain the causes of parents' educational anxiety, taking into account both internal and external causes. At the same time, the research will incorporate relevant theories to categorise the causes into attributions.

2.3. Parental Anxiety

Parental education anxiety is a parent's anxiety about the student's performance and future, and Jin suggests that the characteristics of parental education anxiety lie in the identity of the 'parent' [13]. Parents help their children to complete their education, are indirectly involved in their children's education, build their children's character, and influence their children's development. Because of this special emotional connection, it is normal to feel anxious about the child. Li adds that parental anxiety stems from overwhelming anxiety about educational issues [14]. Chen & Xiao make a similar point that parental anxiety is a result of fear and stress in the competition for scarce resources in society [2]. Concerns about the quality and cost of education have evolved into a common 'symptom' of parental education anxiety.

Currently, scholars have different views on parental education anxiety. Some scholars believe that it is a negative social mindset and that parental anxiety can hinder the healthy development of young people [13]. On the other hand, moderate anxiety can urge students to learn and thus enhance their learning effectiveness. Therefore, appropriate anxiety is necessary. In areas with sufficient educational resources and moderate competition for talent, appropriate anxiety can promote better student achievement. However, when resources are scarce, improved performance does not equate to getting into a good school, getting a good job or gaining adequate social resources. Parents' anxiety is exacerbated by concerns about the future. As this study examines parental anxiety in China in the context of the double reduction policy, the first negative perspective is more applicable in this study, given the tightness of educational resources and excessive parental anxiety in China. Furthermore, Wang & Ru also share the same view as this study, viewing educational anxiety as a problem that needs to be alleviated [15]. Educational anxiety is not only a common psychological state of the general public but also a social mindset issue.

3. Analysis of the Causes of the Phenomenon of Parental Education Anxiety

The double reduction policy reduces the anxiety of students and parents to a certain extent by reducing undue competition from training providers, enhancing school management and reducing the pressure of students' in-school work and out-of-school training. However, the double reduction policy has failed to completely address parents' educational anxiety. Influenced by family capital, parents' increased investment in education generates financial pressure, comparisons with others, limited access to information and cognitive biases, which exacerbate parents' educational anxiety. On the other hand, the intensive relationship with the child also influences parental educational anxiety. This is reflected in parents developing higher expectations and concerns for their children; expecting educational returns; engaging in self-deprivation; and role overstepping. This study will explain the above in detail through a literature research approach.

3.1. Family Capital Influences the Development of Parental Anxiety

Family capital includes economic, cultural and social capital [17]. Economic capital refers to the family's wealth and income, cultural capital includes family education before entering the schooling system, and social capital is the integration of actual or potential resources that individuals have acquired through their social networks [16]. In relation to education in China, economic capital is the investment that families spend on their children's education. This includes purchasing school district properties, hiring family tutors, and enrolling in extracurricular classes. Among other things, school
district properties are properties near good schools, and residents’ children can attend schools for free and without examination. Although subject-based training institutions have been banned after the double reduction policy was enacted. However, families with sufficient financial capital will invest in subject-based education and shift to hobby-based training. For example, swimming, calligraphy and dance. Based on this, parental anxiety arising from economic capital can be summarised as concerns about whether the investment in their child's education is sufficient, and whether others are investing more in their children's education [17].

Second, cultural capital within the family determines the child's abilities. This study focuses on concrete and physical cultural capital, which includes parents' educational background, language, work, culture [16]. Bourdieu suggested that families' pre-invested cultural capital develops children's abilities and talents [17]. Families with a strong culture are more likely to produce highly capable children. Furthermore, the prerequisite for cultural capital is within the family, and the theory is weakened if the cultural capital of poor families is not sufficient to support the development of their children's abilities. China completes full poverty eradication by 2020 and its society is structured with a relatively high proportion of lower-middle income people. As a result, cultural capital has a weaker capacity to influence Chinese society. In the context of the double reduction policy, the lack of cultural capital can lead to parents' limited ability to educate their children rationally. In addition, parents with limited cultural capital have limited cognition and are more easily influenced by those around them. Parents may feel the bandwagon effect of "if others enroll their children in extracurricular courses, I will enroll my child too", thus increasing parents' anxiety about their children's education.

The main influence on social capital is social networks. Following the double reduction policy, teachers are not allowed to engage in paid tutoring. However, parents with relationships can find teachers for their children privately [17]. Parents who lack social capital do not have such resources. Concerns about the quality of schooling and the articulation of junior and senior secondary curricula add to parents' educational anxiety.

3.2. Family Capital as Reflected in Previous Research

Through literature research, this study finds that economic capital in family capital is the main cause of parental anxiety. This is because economic capital constrains educational investment, educational budgets, and influences family financial stress and educational quality, which in turn affects educational outcomes. Moreover, as mentioned above, economic capital has more distinctive characteristics and is easier to compare than cultural and social capital. Furthermore, economic capital can directly influence the cultural and social capital of a family. Parents with limited economic capital have difficulty in accessing differentiated and quality educational resources in China's highly competitive educational landscape. Therefore, the more restricted economic capital is, the more anxious parents are likely to experience.

The points from previous studies can well support the argument of this study - limited economic capital can cause parental anxiety. For example, Huang suggests that limited budgets make it difficult to find good tutors and improve the quality of education [4]. Duan adds that parents are easily influenced by the marketing of training providers, creating a bandwagon effect and enrolling their children in extracurricular training, leading to a tightening of the family's financial budget [18]. Li and Yang also suggest that a lack of economic capital can make parents panic about the unknown and more likely to worry that the quality of education is lagging behind [18]. Furthermore, the Chinese slang phrase 'let's not let our children lose at the starting line' emphasises the mindset of parents who worry about their children falling behind others. This comparison with others is also a comparison of capital between different families. It leads to increased anxiety for parents with limited capital. Finally, Huang adds that some parents over-emphasise the importance of subject education, neglect their
children's physical and mental development, and spend too much on subject tutoring, putting too much financial pressure on the family [4].

Secondly, cultural capital influences parents' interpretation of the double reduction policy, their cognitive scope, their ability to nurture their children, and their choice of whether to think rationally, follow the herd or stick to their own views. Parents with limited cognitive levels are limited by cognitive biases and are more likely to feel anxious as they are unable to judge events objectively and fairly. Cultural capital becomes a tool for upper-middle income families to create educational disparities, further exacerbating the anxiety of parents who lack cultural capital. This is supported by the following studies: firstly, parents with limited cultural capital are prone to the bandwagon effect and are easily influenced by others, making them feel anxious [6]. Secondly, parents lack a scientific and rational understanding of their children's development [9]. Thirdly, parents are vulnerable to the misconception that tutoring can improve performance. Fourth, parents with low educational attainment have a limited cognitive level and are more likely to be anxious.

In addition, social capital influences the educational resources that parents can find for their children, and the information that parents can access. Social capital further exacerbates the degree of difficulty in accessing educational resources and enhances parents' anxiety. Huang adds that parents do not have enough capacity and connections to access the few qualities educational resources after the implementation of the double reduction policy [4]. In addition, Yu and Yao suggest that parents who lack cultural capital have weak information screening skills, limited access to information, and are prone to misunderstandings and anxiety about their understanding of education [19].

Under the influence of the double reduction policy, out-of-school tutoring institutions are regulated and in-school educational resources tend to be equitable. However, out-of-school hobby classes and one-on-one tutoring still exist. Out-of-school resources need to be acquired through capital and relationships, and family capital has become a major influencing factor affecting access to resources. As a result, the inequalities hidden behind family capital persist. This includes unequal budgets for education, differentiated levels of family education and unequal resources for education. Parents who are unable to break the capital barrier are forced into a vicious cycle of educational anxiety [18].

3.3. Intensive Mothering Influences the Development of Parental Anxiety

Intensive mothering refers to the intensive parent-child relationship between child and parent, which is characterised by a child-centred approach in which the mother spends a great deal of energy, time and resources on child-rearing [20]. Intensive mothering is considered to be a characteristic of most families following the modernisation and transformation of the family. Parents will prioritise their children's material and emotional needs, demand greater emotional commitment, and have higher expectations of their children [20]. In addition, the high cost of raising a child translates into expectations of educational rewards, and parents will place greater emphasis on rewarding, utilitarian education. Although the double reduction policy has reduced children's academic burdens, parents' worries about their children's future remain in the context of limited educational resources and fierce competition for resources. At the same time, parents' irrationally high expectations for their children, and the high investment of family capital are hardly rewarded as expected.

3.4. Intensive Mothering in Previous Studies

Through literature research, this study finds that intensive mothering can lead parents to have overly high expectations of their children. This includes setting excessive goals for their children and hoping that education will yield tangible benefits. However, education struggles to meet the utilitarian mindset of parents, and parents whose goals cannot be met can develop anxiety. In addition, some parents may experience self-deprivation and role overstepping. Self-deprivation refers to parents
sacrificing their career plans to return to their families for the sake of their children's education, or boosting the education budget, causing financial pressure on the family. Role overstepping is when parents develop an overly intimate relationship with their children and an excessive desire to control their children's lives.

In terms of excessive expectations, Wang and Ru refer to parents' desire to achieve class mobility through education [15]. Parents over-emphasise educational outcomes, believing that entering university is a necessary option for success. Second, some parents see education as a commodity [14]. Parents believe that the more they invest in education, the more they get in return, and overemphasise the instrumental value of education. Yu and Yao cite the proverb, 'a good scholar who studies with relative ease can become an official', in which parents expect their children to have a higher social status through education [19].

In addition, some parents develop self-deprivation in giving to their children. For example, parents increase their investment in their children's education by cutting back on daily living expenses [18]. Such behaviour is irrational. Deliberately reducing the family's quality of life and putting hopes on the child gives the child a sense of pressure that 'parents are doing this for you', which is not conducive to the child's development. Gao et al. add that parental self-sacrifice includes cutting back on personal entertainment or original career plans in order to better educate the child [21]. Parents' expectations of their children's education become more difficult to meet and anxiety increases.

Finally, some parents can develop role overstepping. For example, the educational outcomes of their children are linked to the success or failure of their parents' lives. A child getting into a good university and getting a high paying job equates to parents achieving success. Some parents over-interfere with their children's time, friendships and even hobbies [21]. For example, they expect their children to devote all their time to study and not to be friends with classmates who do not study well. The result of this role overstepping is conflict between the child and the parents and the child becoming bored with school. Parents' expectations of their children's education become more difficult to be met and anxiety increases.

Although parenting-intensive anxiety has been somewhat alleviated with the implementation of the double reduction policy. The double reduction policy does not allow schools to ask parents to correct homework and parents do not need to accompany their children to subject tuition classes. However, children's after-school time requires higher-quality parental companionship, more emotional commitment from parents, and parents have to make trade-offs between work and family life. High-quality parenting and companionship squeeze parents' time and space, and parental education anxiety is difficult to alleviate.

4. Conclusion

This study has attempted to use theories of family capital and parenting intensity to explain the causes of parental anxiety in China. This research is discussed by interpreting the theory, collating previous research, linking previous research to the theory, and in the context of the double reduction policy. In general, the original intention of the double reduction policy was to reduce the burden on students and reduce out-of-school tutoring. Before the implementation of the double reduction policy, parents' investment in their children's education and comparisons with others can lead them into educational anxiety. After the implementation of the double reduction policy, the economic capital in family capital cannot be used to invest in extra-curricular training in subjects, and parents' education anxiety is somewhat alleviated. However, the cultural and social capital of family capital is beginning to reveal its importance. Parents with limited family capital find it difficult to invest in interest-based training, personally tutor their children and access more educational resources, and become more anxious in the competition for education. In addition, from a parenting-intensive perspective, parents find it difficult to fulfil their responsibility to educate their children and pour their expectations into
schools and out-of-school tutoring institutions. Parents' high expectations of their children and their utilitarian mentality towards the rewards of education remain unabated. When high expectations are not met, parental anxiety remains pervasive. Secondly, changes in education policy will not completely change the status of parental anxiety and its causes, as anxiety does not result from a single factor. In addition, it takes time for policies to be implemented and evaluated, and there is room to expand the data and information on the double reduction policy. The causes of educational anxiety in the context of the double reduction policy need to be studied in more depth.

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